

20th Century Disease:

No guidance from government

Local doctors, social workers and government officials are today attending an all-day workshop about environmental sensitivity, also known as 20th Century Disease. Chris Brown, a former television journalist and president of the Ottawa branch of the Allergy and Environmental Health Association of Canada, welcomes this belated official interest.

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By Chris Brown

There are more myths about the so-called 20th Century Disease than gods in ancient Greece. Attitudinal pollution sits like a dark cloud over the people affected. It's worse than pollution itself so let's clear the air — no pun intended.

For instance, the term itself — 20th Century Disease — suggests these problems are new in this century. In fact, environmental sensitivities have been known for generations. Most of the estimated 20,000 Canadians diagnosed have ancestors with the problems. Some people are sensitive to age-old natural substances such as milk, molds, potatoes and wheat.

Another myth is that sensitivities are simply allergies, resulting from Total Allergy Syndrome (TAS). In fact, Health and Welfare says they result from a "compendium of disorders," only sometimes involving the immune system. Sometimes the endocrine system may be implicated, or the liver, or digestive enzymes.

Another common myth is the supposed absence of medical literature. In fact, there are dozens of articles on sensitivities and chemical susceptibility dating back at least to 1908.

Ironically, supportive professionals do much of the damage. They repeatedly shoot themselves (and their patients) in the foot, posturing as brave Davids against a big bad Goliath, an unbelieving medical profession. This siege mentality is so destructive that several medical institutions have publicly called for more collaborative efforts.

The worst abuse came from health officials at all levels of government. On the basis of an absence of information, some public servants suggested the suffering was all caused by emotional illness. The reputations of people affected were questioned, their dignity and quality of life damaged, by statements an Ontario commission had found "clearly untenable."

Fortunately, while the finicky fought over theory, and who gets paid for what, others stepped in to help. In early 1988, Dr. Bruce Halliday, MP, chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Health and Welfare, invited submissions from the people affected.

That summer, the Canadian Human Rights Commission moved to help. Chief Commissioner Max Yalden wrote the health minister stating he understood that sensitivities were "a true medical problem" and that "we owe it to people to be more public and positive in acknowledging that fact."

By fall, all three political parties were calling for public education to prevent more lives from being devastated by misconceptions. By the end of 1988, there were even tax deductions from the federal government.

But so far the government has not made a clear public statement of recognition, despite long-standing internal recommendations. A Health and Welfare memo under Access to Information legislation states that reports available years ago indicate "there was no doubt" that these illnesses cause "mild discomfort to severe disability."

While recognizing the need for more research on causes and cures, organized medicine has criticized government delays in dealing with related social concerns. The Ontario Medical Association wrote Premier David Peterson's office a year ago stating "individuals are ill with a condition that has not been scientifically defined and they are not being well served in their need for support services. This situation is clearly frustrating for patients, physicians and government and requires careful attention to avoid blaming the victims."

Last July Ontario Health Minister Elinor Caplan finally admitted that "currently, there are

a number of physicians in Ontario who are knowledgeable concerning environmental hypersensitivities." A suicide last summer also prompted Chief Coroner Ross Bennett to suggest that government ministries "establish some clear guidelines as to what they are prepared to provide in the way of services and benefits to the people affected by these disorders."

Fortunately, doctors and health officials at both levels of government have started to clean up misconceptions they themselves helped to foster. Unfortunately, in the meantime, dozens of lives have been devastated.